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Editorial: Sharpening-up the boundaries

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This editorial continues the 'knowledge boundary' theme discussed in previous editorials. In July 2008, the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee published the results from its *Inquiry into the skills capacity within local government to deliver sustainable communities*, (subtitled the *Inquiry into Planning Skills*), which had been launched in January 2008. The report, titled *Planning Matters – labour shortages and skills gaps*, was the latest in a long list of reports to conclude that the planning profession does not, as a whole, have sufficient breadth and depth of skills to do the job society requires it to do. Prior to *Planning Matters*, we had the *Calcutt Review of Housebuilding* (2007); the Academy for Sustainable Community's *Mind the Skills Gap* (2007); the *Barker review of Land Use Planning* (2006), the *Leitch Review of Skills* (2005); the *Barker review of Housing Supply* (2004); the *Minister of State for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning's Modernising Planning* report (1999); and the *Rogers' Urban Task Force* report (1998). Each of these, one way or another, pointed to the need for major adjustments in the planning system, the profession that governs it and the educational system that feeds it. Then there are the reports that have challenged the British planning system at a more fundamental level: Evans and Hartwich's series for Localis/Policy Exchange: *The best laid plans* (2007); *Bigger, Better Faster More: why some countries plan better than others* (2005); *Unaffordable Housing: fables and myths* (2005); *Better Homes, Greener Cities* (2006); and three Institute for Economic Affairs papers: Corkingdale's *The Land Use Planning System* (2004); Pennington's *Liberating the Land*; and Webster's *Co-ordinating Neighbourhoods: who should plan?* (2005). There have also been debates within the profession – in the UK and other countries, as expressed in the Royal Town Planning Institute's *Education Commission Report* (2003); the Planning Institute of Australia's *Planning Education Discussion Paper* (2008); and the forthcoming UN Habitat *Global Report on Human Settlements: revisiting urban planning* (2009).

Together, these represent a clear and unambiguous narrative about planning and a challenge to planning educators. University planning schools in the UK have, by and large, responded well. They collectively won a Royal Town Planning Institute's education prize in 2008, for their contribution to the Institute's Spatial Planning agenda. There is a need, however, to reflect further on the curricula needed to produce new cohorts of highly skilled spatial planners. There is a need to press in and on with fundamental changes that will renew the planning academy in line with the renaissance of planning and urbanism in the world at large.

A powerful idea for sharpening planning knowledge and skills that could be adopted especially in institutions where planning is taught along side other built environment subjects, is to focus on the boundaries between planning and other professional disciplines. The idea is simple: we can sharpen-up planning skills by clarifying the boundaries. Those boundaries are becoming ever more blurred in professional practice. The blurring has led to calls to ignore boundaries and talk of a new or amalgam professional: the general *urbanist*. In principle, this could work. But in

practice, that is not where we are at the moment. It would not be very easy for most UK planning schools to suddenly start producing graduates in the Continental urbanist tradition. Neither might it be desirable. The division of knowledge into subjects, disciplines and professions is as inevitable as the division of labour. Specialisation is necessary for the advancement of knowledge and the creation of wealth and wider human progress. An attempt to sharpen the boundaries may be thought inappropriate at a time when many employers are calling for more generic urban skills. CEBE takes the opposite view. Focusing on the *different* kinds of demands placed upon urban practitioners helps clarify the issues. The different demands create distinct domains of knowledge and skills. Boundaries help divide the field so we can specialise. Boundaries connect as well as divide, however. Physical boundaries are important in navigating between different spatial territories and intellectual, skill and professional boundaries are important in navigating between knowledge and functional territories. So if we reflect frankly on the boundary between planning and property development, for example, we see that there is currently a blurring; a greater sense of shared language, ideas and understanding. If the existing professional and knowledge territories either side of the boundary are indistinct, under threat or clearly anachronistic, then the blurring represents shared territory and may signal a natural shifting in the original demarcation. It may also be that after we examine this shared territory, the original demarcations become clearer, shifting a little or a lot perhaps, but coming into clearer focus as we allow the limits and shape of one subject to define those of the other. The greying of the professional boundary between planning and property development (particularly apparent in regeneration) has resulted in a welcome shift in the knowledge base of planning education. A shared knowledge base will help make a clearer distinction between the roles of planners and property developers. One of the inherited problems of twentieth century planning in the UK has been that planners and developers have occupied what at times seem to be different universes. Similarly, planning in the UK has spent decades drifting away from architecture, landscape, infrastructure planning and from the systematic spatial sciences of geography and economics. The drift means that planning now shares parts of the same territory as these other subjects but with sometimes a distinctly different discourse, emphasis and approach. Developing planning students' knowledge at inter-professional boundaries should help students connect with other disciplines more confidently. It will help them understand their unique contribution and to map their unique knowledge to the knowledge of others. This will help develop a more efficient division of labour in the built environment subjects – one led by knowledge specialism not anachronistic professional silos.

Over the next few years, CEBE will be developing curricula dialogues across key boundaries – through its Shaping Spatial Planning Skills programme. This started in 2008/09 with the boundary between spatial planning and spatial analysis (in the geography and GIS tradition). The first paper in this issue of Transactions, by Richard le Gates, arises from this dialogue, which involved a workshop that brought together internationally leading GIS figures and GIS teachers in planning schools. The second paper, by Nick Nunnington arises from the second boundary on CEBE's radar: between property, planning and regeneration. Both boundaries will be the subject for further workshops and reports in the 2009/10 academic year. After that, we plan to look at the urban design-planning-architecture boundary. The view of townscape, structure and function on one side can be unhelpfully disconnected from that on the other.